

Economic Development and threats to Phom-Naga Cultural Identity

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Abstract: Cultural identity is shared communal experiences which are rooted in a collective memory passed down orally over generations, giving its members a sense of communal purpose. Since the colonial era, the external pressures such as government policies, economic development, modernity, social transition and intercultural interactions have slowly eroded the cultural identity and social fabric. The strong sense of tradition is often challenged by external influences that overshadow or seek to erase these practices.

Economic development is a qualitative improvement in overall human well-being and economic growth, achieved by integrating economic goals with environmental protection, social equity, and responsible governance, for a sustainable and inclusive growth path. This paper attempts to analyse and assess the threats to the erosion of cultural identity posed by economic development in the context of the Phom society. It aims to provide an in-depth exploration of how economisation, globalisation, and urbanisation lead to the erosion of the cultural identity of marginalised sections of society. It gives insights and practical policy recommendations for a development model that is inclusive, sustainable, and rooted in the cultural and ecological wisdom of tribal communities.

Keywords: Economic development, cultural identity, Phom Nagas, threat.

Introduction

Since time immemorial, the tribal people have lived in relative isolation, maintaining a distinct social structure, languages, customs, spiritual beliefs, and rich oral traditions, while maintaining a deep connection to the land and its natural

environment. Cultural identity is shared communal experiences that are rooted in a collective memory passed down orally over generations, giving its members a sense of communal purpose. The community perceives their culture as a way of reasserting its identity. It has profound cultural, historical, and geographical roots, as well as a collective memory that has been passed down orally through the centuries and shared communal experiences. Culture is essential in forming both individual and collective identities by connecting people to their history and giving a sense of belonging. Since the colonial era, external pressures such as Westernization, economic development, urbanization, Christianity, and modernity have led to social transition and intercultural interactions, which have slowly eroded their cultural identity and social fabric. Globalization can be viewed as a process that erodes the uniqueness of local cultures by promoting a standardized global culture driven by Western ideals and economic interests (Zhang, 2009). The strong sense of tradition is often challenged by external influences and pressures that diminish and overshadow these practices.

The Commencement of Cultural Erosion

The Phoms flourished in isolation with a stable cultural identity through the firm social institutions that maintained and preserved the cultural traditions. They had a strong sense of pride and contentment. However, the wind of change began when Christian missionaries arrived and viewed their culture as primitive and pagan. The efforts of the Christian missionary to do away with the 'paganism' by getting rid of the traditional practices and costumes were the main cause of alienating themselves from their deep-rooted and rich culture. The new converts have distanced themselves from the communal activities by embracing a new religion. The believers began to adopt the new culture. Since then, Western culture has been introduced in the Phom land, which erodes the indigenous culture. In the post-independence era, the government implemented socioeconomic policies that were apathetic to their unique social and cultural systems, exacerbating their cultural identity. Urbanization, migration, and globalization were driven by the economic development paradigm, which focused particular attention on underprivileged segments of society for socioeconomic advancement.

The dynamics of economic interactions have overshadowed and weakened minority cultures in favor of dominant ones. By fostering a standardized global

culture driven by economic interests, the era of globalization through economic development has overshadowed the distinctiveness of local cultures, motivated by economic interests and aimed at achieving a qualitative improvement in total human well-being and economic growth by integrating global economic objectives. With the economic advancement, the cultural identity of the tribe is at the crossroads as its cultural practices are threatened.

The Threats to Cultural Identity Due to Economic Development

E. B. Tylor 1871 definition of culture is “the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” (White, 1959). Ehrlich defines custom as the living law of the people based on social behavior observed by the people, whether in matters of religious habits, family life, or commercial relations (Nelken, 2008). Customs and cultural practices are an integral part of people’s way of life and their worldview. Economic activity is part of the daily engagement in the ordinary business of life, which helps sustain individuals and their community. As the community progresses, gradual changes occur due to internal or external factors. According to Karl Marx, economic structure is the base that determines the superstructure, its social and political structures. Economic development, driven by changes in the means of production, is the driving force behind historical change (Harman, 1986). Amartya Sen’s views economic development as the expansion of capacities that contribute to the advancement of society through the realization of individuals’, firms’, and communities’ potential (Sen, 1988). Hence, economic development occurs when individual agents have the opportunity to develop the capacities that allow them to actively engage and contribute to the economy. According to the economist Joseph Schumpeter, economic development is a process of a ‘creative destruction’ as it dismantles long-standing economic structures, thereby changing the social setting, habits, and customs. In an increasingly interconnected world, economic progress in the globalized economy has undoubtedly changed how cultures interact, evolve, and express their identities. Significant obstacles are posed by the forces of economic growth, including the potential for cultural uniformity and the erosion of customs and languages. In the path of development, minorities are marginalized and endangered by the dominance of popular culture. The encroachment of development presents both opportunities and challenges for tribal communities.

On the one hand, the quality of life for tribal people is improved by infrastructure, work opportunities, access to healthcare and education, and higher living standards. However, these advantages frequently come at the expense of cultural deterioration. Tribal people may lose connection with their native languages, rituals, and social structures as they relocate to cities or participate in national economic systems.

Maintaining traditions while embracing progress remains a critical challenge. One of the major concerns raised by scholars is the extent to which globalization contributes to the erosion of cultural memory—the collective memory of a society that preserves its past experiences, values, and heritage (Assmann, 2010). Economic development can bring about irreversible changes in personal beliefs, cultures, and preferences, causing an identity crisis in a way. The threats to the cultural identity of the tribals, with special reference to the Phom society, are discussed below.

Agricultural and Production Pattern

The tribal lives center on the agricultural calendar. Agriculture is not only an economic activity but is intertwined with the socio-cultural practices and their relationship with nature. The Phoms viewed nature as sacred, where forests, rivers, trees, and animals are considered integral to their spiritual and physical well-being. The concept that all elements of nature are interrelated develops a sense of responsibility for the environment. These deeply held ethical ideas have led to practices such as sustainable hunting, fishing, and farming. This practice is long-term sustainable and closely connected to the soil, as it ensures the land's fertility while also aligning with the tribe's spiritual and cultural beliefs about natural cycles. Moreover, tribes often possess traditional knowledge, often referred to as “tribal wisdom,” related to agriculture and ecology that has been passed down through generations, playing a significant role in the preservation of biodiversity and the sustainable management of natural resources.

With regard to economic interests, the traditional agricultural system is often misunderstood as unprofitable and outdated. Rampant deforestation and development projects have altered the geographical landscape. And due to the introduction of chemicals and new commercial crops and plants, some natural vegetation and crops are neglected, which can lead to the extinction of certain vegetation that is part of the local ecosystem and cultural identity. For instance, certain crop varieties, orchids, hornbills, tigers, and wild nuts, which are heard in the

Büshah (folk stories), *Bü-ow* (traditional attire), and *Pang* (Morung), are becoming less relatable to the modern generations. In the process, the link between the past and the future becomes blurred because nature is the silent, yet giant witness of the past to posterity.

Urbanization

The land is the heart of tribal identity, which is viewed as sacred and is deeply tied to their physical space. It is a part of their collective identity, influencing their customs and social organization. A tribe's geographical location frequently influences its identity. For many tribes, the land is more than just a physical location; it is a sacred and spiritual entity with profound cultural significance. This strong connection to the earth influences a tribe's lifestyle, rituals, and worldview. Natural characteristics, such as forests, rivers, mountains, and plains, are frequently incorporated into tribal identity and mythology.

The urbanization process disrupts the traditional community structures and practices. The green and deep forests are sacrificed in the name of development. There is an increasing trend where villages are being modeled after towns and traditional fields are being converted into farmhouses. The traditional villages are disappearing as housing patterns, village administration, and the morung system are all compromised and altered. With economic advancement, tribal customs and traditional leadership structures often conform to national standards, which can lead to a crisis of identity, where the tribe's cultural essence is at risk of being eroded by outside influences. Urbanization destabilizes and alienates traditional communal structures and customs.

Migration on Ethnicity and Ancestry

The Phoms place a high value on knowing one's genealogy, as it connects people to their cultural roots and reinforces their status within the community. This ancestry-based identification is also important in terms of social hierarchy and leadership roles in tribal communities. When people are uprooted or forced to interact with mainstream cultures, their feeling of ethnic belonging is sometimes disrupted, resulting in identity crises and a struggle for cultural preservation.

Being displaced from ancestral lands disturbs not only physical livelihoods but also cultural and spiritual rituals, causing feelings of loss and separation. The

cultural lives of the metropolis are dispersed with other dominating and popular cultures. Their posterity tends to drift further away from their ancestral culture and is prone to identity crises.

Commercialization of Cultural Costumes

Unlike mainstream fashion, tribal attire with a specific design and function represents identity and pride that are strongly rooted in the people's history, beliefs, and daily lives. It expresses the wearer's identity by indicating tribe connection, age, social rank, and, in some cases, spiritual or religious significance. The elements of tribal costume symbolize the strong connection between indigenous communities and their natural surroundings, weaving together stories of lineage, spirituality, and social structure, with each piece conveying a distinct narrative that endures through generations. The patterns on the garments have a deeper meaning, reflecting the wearer's inner spirit and respect for their ancestral heritage. For example, the geometric motifs and elaborate embroidery on their clothes depict the tale of their ancestors, with symbols of warriors, weapons, birds, animals, flowers, and agricultural crops representing bravery, triumph, and splendor.

The commodification of cultural activities and symbols for global consumption undermines the ability of local groups to maintain their authentic cultural identities. It transforms cultural practices into performances for financial benefit rather than genuine representations of identity. There are issues regarding cultural appropriation, in which the genuine value of these costumes and jewelry is diluted or misconstrued, reducing respect for their origins and the people who have preserved these traditions for generations. Furthermore, when the socioeconomic landscape changed, the value of cultural garments shifted dramatically. As global culture continues to spread through technological advancements, media, and tourism, traditional cultural practices, particularly in less economically developed nations, face the risk of being subsumed under the weight of global consumerism and Western cultural exports (Petrov, 2018). It is observed that owning traditional costumes is a symbol of economic prestige, and those without one often feel the economic burden of owning one. Even more threatening is that the cultural attire has become an occasional fashion for festivals and cultural events. The younger generation in urban areas has increasingly adopted Western fashion, food, and entertainment preferences, sometimes at the expense of their own cultural heritage

(Zhang, 2009). Young generations are more familiar and comfortable with Western or mainland costumes than their own, and lose their rich cultural legacy.

Threat to Linguistic Heritage

Language is a connecting link among the tribesmen, bridging the past, present, and future by transmitting cultural values. The oral traditions of the Phoms were passed down through generations via oral stories, folk songs and tales, the morung system, practical experiences, and collective memories. In the absence of a written script and record, the spoken language alone was responsible for passing on the rich traditional legacy of their ancestors, and the survival of the common identity hinge upon it. The Phoms have six distinct language categories according to the geographical ranges. With the advancement in economic development and global networks for economic interaction, there is a trend of gradual decline in the use of local languages, and dominant languages such as Nagamese and English are becoming increasingly linked to social mobility and economic opportunity.

When a community acquires a new language, it is referred to as a language shift. This process frequently results in the original language declining or becoming extinct. As a result, language shift is accelerated by globalization, changing community identities, and economic benefits. Global languages are prioritized for productive communication in urban areas where diverse groups congregate. The global reach of English as the dominant language of communication in international business, media, and the internet further reinforces this trend, leading to concerns about the decline of indigenous languages (Zhang, 2009).

There is a significant shift in language preference, with English emerging as the predominant language in global economic interactions due to its association with economic prosperity and modernity. Many Phoms speak a blend of Phom, English, or Nagamese in both informal and formal settings. Language being the most potent expression of our identity, by endangering our language, our roots and knowledge systems become vulnerable on the global platform.

Threat to Traditional Values

Each Phom village is independent and typically structured in tight-knit units, with a profound sense of interdependence among its members. The social system prioritizes the community over the individual, where each member is vital to the community's

well-being, and collaboration is necessary for its survival. In both joyful and sorrowful times, they generously share resources, including food, shelter, resources, and time. For example, the villagers lend a hand when building new homes; they support one another during harvest season. The community shares happiness as well as grief during any celebration and sorrow. Additionally, the maintenance of the community's water source and footpath is a shared responsibility. This collective responsibility ensures that individuals are not isolated but are instead nurtured within a supportive environment where every member contributes to the greater common good. There was a strong sense of honesty, hard work, loyalty, and respect for parents, elders, and leaders. They have a deep, spiritual relationship with the natural world and live in harmony with nature by recognizing their dependence on the environment and honoring its cycles and rhythms through simple yet sustainable cultivation of natural resources.

In the drive for economic advancement and the pursuit of material riches, which is increasingly motivated by individualism; loneliness, isolation, and existential discontent issues are pervasive in society. It calls into question the tribal values that offer a sense of communal support, generosity, respect for ancestors, elders, leaders, traditions, honesty, hard work, and a deeper purpose, as well as a feeling of belonging, mutual care, and collective responsibility. The traditional values are the most intrinsic component of every culture. When the time-tested traditional values erode, the integration of the tribe is challenged.

Findings

- Economic development has led to the erosion of cultural practices, traditions, and languages among the Phoms.
- The economic factors, such as urbanization, migratory patterns, production patterns, and commercial activities, threaten the tribal cultural identity.
- The Western economic systems spread a standardized culture that erodes local traditions and values, where the dominant cultures can overshadow local traditions and customs as people adopt foreign lifestyles, leading to a neglect of one's cultural heritage.
- In the commercialization of the culture, the economic significance outweighs the cultural values, resulting in compromise with cultural originality and authenticity

- There is a growing disconnection between material prosperity and emotional serenity due to a decline in tribal values.
- As global corporations expand into new markets, local businesses, art forms, and languages may struggle to thrive, resulting in further cultural erosion.

Suggestions

- The development model should be inclusive, sustainable, and grounded in the ecological and cultural knowledge of the tribal society in order to preserve and revitalize culture.
- A balanced strategy for development should be adopted to help tribal people economically while maintaining their unique character and ecological expertise.
- Sustainable farming methods, such as organic products and herbal medicine based on traditional knowledge systems, can be promoted as part of a green economy to ensure the preservation of biodiversity and the sustainable management of natural resources.
- Ecotourism centered on tribal customs, art, and the natural world can combine the preservation of cultural heritage with financial benefits from earnings without compromising their identity or the environment.
- Social media and digital tools, such as cultural heritage applications and online archives of indigenous languages, can be used to document, preserve, share, and promote the unique indigenous cultures worldwide.
- To protect cultural identity, governments, nongovernmental organizations, and cultural institutions must develop policies that encourage both international engagement and cultural preservation.
- To provide financial and institutional support for cultural initiatives to promote local heritage, such as funding for cultural festivals, language revitalization projects, and the preservation of historical sites that advance local history.

Conclusion

Cultural identity crises arise from the conflict between traditional tribal ways of life and the demands of mainstream development. It is crucial to learn from and incorporate tribal knowledge systems into larger national and international discourses rather than imposing dominant ideologies or development paradigms.

Finding one's tribal identity requires striking a delicate balance between one's own self-awareness and the larger social and cultural influences at play. In the intricate process of identity building brought on by socioeconomic transition, traditional cultures should be integrated with global elements without losing their distinctiveness, which demonstrates both continuity and change. The tribe must choose a new set of progressive ideals to re-establish a connection to the core principles of their cultures in order to successfully engage in the economic system while preserving their distinct identity.

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